

Interview with Stephen Paterson Belcher

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Information Series

STEPHEN PATERSON BELCHER

Interviewed by: Jack O'Brien

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Q: This is September 29, 1988. My name is Jack O'Brien. I'm in the home of an old friend and colleague, Pat Belcher, who has offered to contribute his memories to the operation, Oral History. Pat, please identify yourself and start out as you wish.

Belcher Background

BELCHER: My name is Stephen Paterson Belcher, usually know as Pat. Born in 1916 so I'm 72 now. I had been with the Civil Affairs Division of the Army and then State. So I was already aboard when USIA was created. I retired in 1972 and I'm still enthusiastic, witness the fact that I'm leaving in two weeks to escort a cultural troupe to Southeast Asia. I've been doing this for about ten years, because it's one aspect of the program I really believe in. I love intercultural collisions, the sharing of experiences, what have you - Americans meeting foreigners on their own soil and having a mutually beneficial exchange.

But to go back: The University of Vermont. Army in Morocco and Italy. I had an easy time of it attached to a typewriter most of the time and enjoying the exposure to foreign lands. I had been working with the National Board of Review of Motion Pictures before and after

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the War, so had some expertise in movies, and especially documentaries which were coming into their own.

The job folded up, and I heard about the possibility of an openings for Films Officers in Germany so applied. That sounded pretty good. But as soon as I got my application in, I discovered there would be a reshuffling at HICOG (The High Commission for Germany). They had eliminated all Theater Officers, as the Theater Officers filled any vacancies in the Motion Picture Officer slots, so there were no openings. But they accepted my application to work in the Civil Affairs Division in New York.

Q: This was what year, Pat?

1948: To The Film Shop At HICOG's Civil Affairs Division In New York; Documentaries For Post War Occupied Areas

BELCHER: 1948. I got to work on films being made for the occupied areas of Germany, Austria, Japan and Korea, assisting in the contracting for short documentaries on particular subjects. In a way being a producer of the movies, ten minutes in length, black-and-white, budgeted at about \$10,000. Incredible freedom! The Army was just wonderful! There was a colonel in charge, but he was sympathetic. We had quite a spirited, liberal bunch of people who were very interested in the democratization effort.

We dropped Austria pretty soon. Then Germany. Then Korea and wound up just having Japan. We did some study of their own films and anthropology of the areas and produced a body of short films which the State Department took over when they started opening USIS Centers. The bulk of titles in the film libraries were these fairly simple-minded documentaries on key subjects about American life and processes, plus the earlier great OWI documentaries. And there were also the acquired films, which the Army had gotten rights for, to produce language versions.

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Let me cite an example of the kind of thing we did. I read in the Pittsford, Vermont, report of its Town Meeting that they had voted funds for a hot lunch program out at the one-room Furnace Brook schoolhouse. My family came from Pittsford, so I had contacts there. The CAD contracted for a filmmaker and cameraman to go up and shoot for 3 days in March, to show how the young mothers got together and were influential enough to get funds out of the entrenched older men who ran things at the Town Meeting. The townspeople entered into it marvelously. The schoolhouse could not have been more photogenic in deep snow. The film was eventually translated into something like 38 language versions. A couple of years ago I was up in Pittsford and borrowed the print the producer had given the townspeople and we showed the film at the Senior Citizen free lunch. I was sitting next to the teacher. It played like a house afire! We had to run it a second time to wild applause. The State Historical Office in Montpelier now has a print.

Civil Affairs Division Phases Out - Belcher Moves To State Department's Motion Picture Unit [Part of USIA's predecessor, ILA]

When the State Department also took over even Japan, it seemed as though they should take over the Civil Affairs Division. But here I suspect some of the State Department's over-refined standards and not-so-nice ways cropped up. Several of the CAD film people were Jewish. I, 100% blue-eyed WASP, had no trouble transferring to State. The others never got there.

I was put in charge of the acquisitions program of State's Film Unit and enjoyed that thoroughly, especially during the Truman era when the budget for our overseas work was suddenly much larger and we could contract with the Soviet for Applied Anthropology, for them to serve what became the Motion Picture Section of USIA.

There was money to give thought to how to communicate with peoples around the world who haven't a clue what a movie is — maybe don't even know what a door is, or a car, or a mosquito. We got some very sound advice from the anthropologists. Several hour-

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long films were made, some of which were perfectly beautiful documentaries, on human experiences which are common to societies the world over — birthdays, coming-of-age, marriage, etc. I remember “And Now Miguel,” especially, about a boy being allowed to go up into the mountains with the men for the sheep's summer pasturage. It got an Academy award, a great novel had become a great film. Those were good days!

But I soon realized that it would be much more useful to me if I could show some of these movies abroad, to see what on earth the audiences' reactions were. We got some reports from the field but they weren't very satisfactory. So I took a flyer and put my name in to — weren't we the IIE program at that time? For International Information and Education?

1952: Assignment Cairo - Deputy Films; Later Book Translations Officer

Well, yes, there was a vacancy for a Films Officer in Sri Lanka, or was it Ceylon then? There was a film officer there who didn't drink and the post found this quite a trial. I was asked if I drank, and I said, “yes.” I read a bit about it, and it sounded marvelous. However, the Films Officer had some second thoughts and decided he'd drink, after all. There were openings in Japan or Egypt and I opted for Egypt because I didn't want to be involved with mopping up after the Army in Japan. Egypt sounded challenging so we went in 1952. I was to be Assistant Films Officer. There were funds to produce some films in Cairo, using an Egyptian director, cameraman and so forth, and I was to supervise the productions.

My wife was pregnant and I will say the Agency (or more properly, State) was very understanding about that. There was a Films Officer Conference on Cyprus and we spent a week there on our way out. The Films Section had three Americans in it at that time. Blake Cochran as Films Officer, myself and a technician.

Q: What year was that?

BELCHER: 1952 to 1957. With one home leave in between. Two sons born the first tour. Had a ball! Loved it! The first PAO was Bob Payne, rough but a wonderful trainer! The

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second PAO, who had been the Information Officer, was Bill Weathersby. I have the highest praise for Bill, who was here for supper night before last and is still one of the best.

But the Film program wound down and there was no real need for the Technician or me. So I became Exhibits, and then Publications Office, and wound up with Book Translations. And sometimes I was Acting BPAO because of my familiarity with Cairo.

A. Ambassador Jefferson Caffery - A Success Ambassador Byroade - Something Else

Early on, the most enlightening aspect was working under Jefferson Caffery, about the last of the old line, 19th century Ambassadors who did things properly: traveled with his own wine cellar and servants, always dressed for dinner!

Another education was the first Suez Crisis. A series of problems had arisen between the United States and Egypt. Mr. Caffery had ushered King Farouk out. Naguib came in and then Nasser. Washington decided to replace Caffery with a young general, blue-eyed Henry Byroade, on first assignment for the Department. They thought Generals Byroade and Nasser would have lots in common and relations would hum smoothly. But within hours of his arrival almost, Nasser signed the Aswan Dam agreement with Russia and Byroade had absolutely no relationship whatsoever with Nasser. There was eclipse of our relations with Egypt which moved closer to Moscow. Byroade had nothing to do; didn't have a clue how to run an Embassy. It was his first tour abroad.

B. Ambassador Raymond Hare; PAO William Weathersby Arrive In Time For First Suez Crisis, The French, British, Israeli Attack

Ambassador Byroade had left by the time of the first Suez Crisis and Ambassador Raymond Hare came who knew what to do even if relations were bad with Egypt. Also, I experienced the Department's handling of an evacuation and will say they did a beautiful job! Took care of the dependents generously. It was an interesting experience, being bombed by the combined British, French and Israeli forces. The British could not have

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been more gentlemanly about it. I was assigned other functions beside my normal USIS operations, like manning a radio up in the Embassy top floor from midnight to 4:00 a.m. or something, and I would get word that the British were going to drop two bombs at such and such a point and to get the people out of the way, please, south of Cairo, in Helwan, or wherever. They were most decent!

Here I had the chance to observe something about human nature that I'd noted during the war during air raids. Some people are liable to panic, others are calm and roll with the punches. We had a very good program going! Hard, interesting work! But the military attach# wanted to fill our file cabinets with ammo and have weapons handy, and all kinds of jazz like that. Terrifying!

Luckily, Bill Weathersby and Ambassador Hare were balanced and cool and kept the parties under control. There were those, I think, in the Pentagon who wanted the Navy to steam up the Nile and blast Nasser off the map!

C. Book Translation Plan Helps Publicize Eisenhower Middle East Peace Plan, And Later Gets USIS Books Widely Distributed In Arab World

As far as what USIS was doing, President Eisenhower came up with what was called "The Eisenhower Plan," for peace in the Middle East. We were to try to get this known around the country. But at this time the Russians were the chief advisors and Nasser had absolute control of the press, radio, all the media! There was a primary school right behind USIS and all day long its loudspeakers carried the state radio news of the glorious Egyptian victories over all the weight of the imperialists and colonialists and Zionists! Endless Big Lie, over and over, to grind it in to the exclusion of any other news. For us, there seemed to be plenty of money and we could try anything to overcome this hurdle. We had "The Plan" printed up as a pamphlet in the USIS print shop and managed to get a contract for a front page ad in one of the government newspapers for every day of the week. Great! It got the word out that USIS was offering "The Plan" free and we had hordes coming to

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the USIS gate to get their free copy. There were businessmen who would send their office boys for not one but ten copies, or twenty. We were happy to oblige. We discovered that down town, it was being sold so we thought, why not sell it ourselves. We engaged some urchins to peddle it although we were giving it away free. The urchins pocketed the profits.

We were also able to get some slides in movie theaters, advertising our give-away, and paid for big billboard ads on the Midan Al Goummeriah and other major intersections. "Get your copy of the 'Eisenhower Plan' free from USIS!" At night, the Russians or somebody would slosh great buckets of paint up across these ads. The next morning, I'd have to go down to the contractor and say our ad has been disfigured a bit, would you please clean it up. So for our contract week, those ads were up. This was creative USIS work. It was fun! Bill Weathersby was a great person to work with on things like this.

Then there were book translations to get out. Remember the old Arthur Goodfriend pictorial standby, "What Is Communism?" We decided to do that in Arabic and we hired the artists and the printers who worked for the Russians, to do the cover and layout and artwork for our version. In fact, it was a hideous book! God-awful! But it looked like another Russian publication, and sold very well! Cropped up at all their outlets.

Then another project I had was to do a book on the Hungarian Revolt which had been going on concurrently with the First Suez Crisis. The Egyptians had not heard anything at all about Hungary, they were so preoccupied with their own war with the combined forces of Britain, France and Israel. So I spent about a week at home, reading all the U.N. testimony about the Hungarian Uprising, plus some quick books which had come out by LIFE, and one or two others, to put together a book just for the Egyptian reader of what had gone on which they knew nothing about at all. I developed quite a bit of admiration for Secretary Dulles for his handling of the U.N. discussions at that time. It was fascinating! I was proud!

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Cairo was the center for the book publishing industry for the entire Arab world. We discovered that some of our books were cropping up in Mecca, Saudi Arabia. The pilgrims would buy copies and take them off to Arabic-speaking and Moslem countries around the world. At this time, USIA also created Franklin Publications to do book translations of a clean, worthwhile, educationally-justified sort.

Q: Let's identify Franklin, shall we? What it was and particularly what role USIS played.

BELCHER: It was particularly Datus Smith, recruited from Princeton University Press. I think Cairo's was the first overseas operation that he headed. He had been working in Iran and India before, translating American books and publishing them abroad, using name scholars. It turned out later that CIA money was behind this.

Datus came to Cairo and started an operation. Bob Payne's cultural advisor, Hassan El Aroussy, was taken out of USIS and put in an office down town to head this operation, and my wife became his secretary. So, while I was doing the USIS book translations, some of which were printed in the USIS print shop, many contracted out, hard-headed, meaty, propaganda books, Franklin Publications was more academic. It made for quite a lively Book Translation program!

1957: From Cairo To Lagos; Nigeria In The Early Throes of Being Independent

When my second tour ended in Cairo, mid-August 1957, they offered me PAO jobs in Beirut or Lagos. I decided there were all too many Arabists ahead of me, and although I had tried to learn conversational Arabic in Embassy classes, I wasn't going to be an Arabic scholar. So why not take a fling in Black Africa where there was no competition whatsoever of others wanting to become African experts!

USIA Lagos was a tiny post with two officers and a secretary. There was a one-man Branch post in Ibadan, and two more to be opened in Kaduna and Enugu. The independent countries of black Africa at that time were Liberia, Ethiopia and Ghana

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and there were one or two other diplomatic posts - Consulate Generals in Mozambique, Angola and Dakar. No good careers were to be made in Africa, so the State Department just assigned people who were not very promising. It was a mess! But just starting to get exciting. Ghana had gotten its independence in 1957, and you could see the independence wave coming. So they started assigning slightly better people, I think - like me for example!

A party of State Department officials came out to visit these small countries to see where the problems were and to get the lay of the land. They were pretty horrified by everything they saw, in all the prospective independent countries of Africa. Well, they hold their lady-line noses, finished up and went back to Washington to make their recommendations of what it would take to open up Embassies.

We also had Congressional tours coming through — people like Senator Ellender, though my brush with him was after independence, in Cotonou, rather than before. Their books made hilarious reading!

When I arrived in Lagos in '57, I believe the Consulate General noted about 200 Americans arriving in the course of a year. With the move toward independence, this increased, until by the end of my tour, just about every plane had two or three Americans with suitcases full of money to dole out in this great, promising country of Nigeria, the bell-weather country of Black Africa (and its most populous), with the greatest hope for democracy because its tribes had learned to live with one another.

It was a perfectly wonderful post. Within about two weeks, I was on a first-name basis with almost everyone who counted. We used to have invitations for two or three parties a night. We'd be doing the highlife dance at Sunday brunches and then go on to lunches with dancing, and continue in the evening. It was hard keeping awake at the desk during office hours, but the nightlife was exciting and productive. Also it was furiously interracial - determined it was going to make a good go of respecting other races - European, Middle

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Eastern, Asian or American. There was a drinking society called the Island Club which was a marvel of interracial harmony and good times. Oh, sometimes it was a little rough. Prime Minister MacMillan was visiting once and as he was going through the pool room, he accidentally nudged the elbow of a pool-player, who all but knocked him down. They didn't pay much attention to protocol. They did their own thing, their own way. But they were proud and on the move! It was a great country! And they were so grateful for any help offered or hand held out in friendship!

Back in Washington, they learned about this. When I wound up, I wanted to go back for a second tour to see it into independence in October, but there was a policy that white men couldn't survive two consecutive tours in Black Africa. Black Americans could, but not white. So I was to be replaced by someone who outranked me and USIS Lagos within one month of my leaving had twelve Americans assigned to it and the Branch posts were to become two-man posts. I had wanted the USIS posture to be that independence was not going to be like moving from night into day, but it was going to be Nigerians assuming responsibility for their own destiny. They were going to have to make their own decisions without reliance on outsiders.

But of course, those advisors and foundation representatives, with money kept coming. The money we threw at them was not very good for the Nigerians. Pretty soon there was graft of appalling proportions at the highest level and baksheesh was a way of life at the lowest. Nigerian relations with the US soured. And as we know, there were a series of assassinations of fine men, and then the Biafran war arose, fought over tribal issues and access to money.

First, A Washington Tour; Then In 1962 Cotonou, Dahomey Where Independence Was Also Brand New

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I came back to Washington for two years and then went out to Cotonou, right next door. Dahomey had just gotten its independence, a little after Nigeria, and it was useful for me to have a comparison between Anglophone and Francophone Africa.

Q: Before going on to Cotonou, what was your assignment here?

BELCHER: Desk officer in the African Area covering East Africa though I had never been to East or South Africa. My wife and I got involved with some of the African activity going on in Washington. My wife was working with a Women's Committee on Africa, trying to find homes for African diplomats who had come to Washington, or to find them Embassies. Even trying to find an apartment for Rudy Aggrey who had become Assistant Secretary Soapy Williams's official aide de camp. He needed a place to entertain in. He had done creditable service in Africa and in Paris and he needed an apartment in Washington, and in Northwest Washington at that.

My wife and I were invited to a number of the African receptions and we enjoyed them. Their diplomats needed help in the worst way. One Northern Nigerian had a wife who didn't know how to use scissors! She wanted to make her own dresses and finally she did, after taking a course at Singer. This was a fascinating time, with worthwhile work to do.

Q: So, after two years, you were assigned to Cotonou. As PAO?

BELCHER: As PAO. It has been a one-man post but now had a young JOT to help me. Francophone Africa was vastly different from Anglophone Africa. We had a very sympathetic Ambassador, Robinson McIlvaine, who just didn't pay much attention to some of the Big Issues, like Law of the Sea, and Atomic Energy Inspection and the like. We didn't really tell them very much about the United States. The Ambassador just wanted me to go around and let them meet an American. The French were of course afraid we were coming in with all guns blazing, to take over their colonies completely. We weren't going to do that at all. I also discovered that at least among the tribes along the coast, there was an

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accepted theory that evil things came from across the sea so I never told them where the United States was!

A. President Kennedy's Shift In Diplomatic Attention To Third World Including Africa Highly Popular

I got around a lot, especially with wild mobile unit trips. We had some great films. This was the Kennedy era which just coincided with the independence splurge in Africa. They considered him something of a godparent to the new nations and Kennedy had successfully changed our foreign policy alignment from an east-west rivalry to a north-south struggle for mutual understanding and cooperation. The Africans appreciated this. Every country of Africa looked upon Kennedy as their particular friend and supporter. The film of his inauguration was exciting! It played beautifully! Up and down the length of this 200-mile post-stamp country we took the film and they loved it!

The post had had a predecessor PAO but he had a heart attack and was evacuated. Jean Graffis had been there for just a few months. He had a French wife and spoke very good French himself. He had found a nice spot for a Center, opposite the bus depot, downtown, crowded, near the marketplace, where the action was. I got a house for us nearby, in what was called the Zone Industrielle, rather than in the European ghetto at the other end of town. Our house was the one only in that area with running water and electricity. There were only one or two Europeans — all others were nice, middle-class Africans. The country was Dahomey then but is now called Benin. Lots of fun! Great times!

B. Belcher Rejects Offer To Head Dahomey Government

Once they had a surge of political activity and wanted to overthrow the president. I had a mobile unit show off in a village and had to go tell them that we wouldn't be able to come that night because of the curfew. When I took off, the servants suggested we drape some palm branches across the front of the car as a symbol of I didn't know what. I did so, and went out to the village and saw people coming towards me, brandishing their coconut palm

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branches. I stopped the car, got out, and they approached us. I was with a new young JOT assistant. They asked if I and my assistant, Miss Yvonne Williams, wouldn't take over their country. They felt we could run it better than their African leaders. I thanked them but no thanks!

It was a funny country, but a nice country, most deserving of help. It had really almost no reason for being. Its economy was reduced to almost zero. The only thing it produced were bright, educable young men who are running many of the civil services of other Francophone countries of Sub-Saharan Africa. All the publications published in Paris for Black Africa are produced by Dahomians. And I'm still in touch with some of them.

Q: You had two years there?

1963: Reluctantly, Belcher Goes To Paris; Takes Over Dragon Student Center

BELCHER: Yes. And then transferred kicking and screaming to work for USIS Paris, as Cultural Center Director running the Dragon Student Center, but on the African payroll. European budgets were going down as the Agency had to open all these new posts in Africa. Paris was having to close Branch Posts. There were people who had spent three or four tours in France and were now being assigned to these ridiculous little posts in Francophone Africa.

Q: Who was PAO in Paris?

BELCHER: John Mowinckel. As I say, I hadn't really wanted to go to Paris, because when my wife was evacuated from Cairo during the first Suez crisis, she got a glimpse of how USIS posts in Europe are operated. Mostly the people are hiding from visiting Americans. Now, we liked the bush. We liked the third world. But the African Area felt that so many African students were in France getting naughty Marxist ideas, perhaps USIS could do something about this in France. USIS Paris was willing to accept this contribution to its staff even though it was paid for by another geographic area.

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I think this was perhaps rightly resented by the Paris CAO, my boss and a fine man, Doug Schneider, who was practically binational. He had been in France before the war, and then worked for the OWI. He thought it was unethical for USIS to be subverting their ex-colonials right there in the metropole. This was undermining France. I had to be careful what I did. But I had fun.

There was a very creative Executive Officer in Paris who taught me how to budget for a seminar. I should overplan and submit an enlarged budget, with a third party accepting the contract for it. Thus, I would get more money than I really needed and could just keep the extra money in my safe at the Dragon Center, for emergency use. Other people at USIS Paris had a hard time getting any reimbursement for representational expenses. I had no problem whatsoever. At the drop of a hat, I could turn on a lovely little reception down in the basement. We had one of the most exciting places imaginable at that time. There's a lot of great American talent in Paris at any time of the year. You can draw on this for lectures, concerts, exhibits, what have you. Poetry readings, music, you name it. I would try to have a hook, to attract Africans.

And I would try to take advantage of Black Americans who were resident in Paris. Of 15,000 Americans, I think it was, who were resident in the Paris Consular district, at least one thousand were resident Blacks who had never had much to do with the American Embassy. I wonder whether even Josephine Baker was ever invited to an Embassy reception. Before I came, there had been the March on Washington and a parallel March in Paris on the Embassy. This was the first time the Blacks in Paris had ever done anything with the whites. It was organized by the American Church on the Left Bank, and it was a nice, peaceful, mingling of Blacks and whites.

Q: Reel Two of the interview, by Jack O'Brien, conducted on the 29th day of September, 1988. To you, Pat.

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BELCHER: I had been describing my work as Information Center Director at the Dragon Center on the Left Bank in Paris in the '60s.

A. Visit of Roy Wilkins (Head of NAACP) To Paris; Embassy Reception, Then Butterfly McQueen's Night Club

There was a lot of interest in France in the American Civil Rights movement. And we had quite a few notable American Blacks coming through Paris. Among them was Roy Wilkins, head of the NAACP. He gave a talk at the Dragon Center and then we were asked to invite some African students to meet him at the DCM's home, where he would answer questions. Luckily, I was again assisted by Ms. Yvonne Williams who selected the students carefully and it went very well. Wilkins was a very distinguished white-hair gentleman. A useful exchange was conducted. The students were seated on small gold folding chairs and trays of croques monsieurs and sandwiches would come around. But of course, the vast majority of Blacks in Paris — Americans and Africans, would have been distinctly unhappy in those elegant surroundings. Again, Yvonne Williams gave me a lot of good advice on how to handle some of these situations. The DCM's soiree was the appropriate thing to do with Roy officially, but she thought we might also expose him to some other aspects of the Black community in Paris. They were part of his parish too, after all. So we took him to Butterfly McQueen's, one of Paris' black nightclubs, arriving about 11:00 at night. It was dimly lit, the people were fairly far gone. The bartender recognized Roy as a familiar face, shook his hand and gave him a basket of chicken wings. Slowly, others recognized this father-figure, soon drunks were falling all over him. So he was exposed to a slice of Paris he had never seen before. That was a good education for him.

B. SNCC Visitors Show Up Frequently

Among other visitors we had were a group from SNCC (The Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee) who had been so active in the southern Civil Rights movement. This was after the Mississippi summer project when three American whites had been

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buried in a levee in Mississippi. Some of the volunteers had been doing voter registration and were given a trip to visit Sekou Toure of Guinea by Harry Belafonte. So they went out to Guinea and saw Africa. They had a great time and Sekou Toure treated them like the heroes they were.

Art Bardos was the PAO in Guinea and he said, "Flying out of here, your plane goes home via Paris. If you have any problems in Paris, just phone Pat Belcher at such and such a phone number." So we got accustomed to getting phone calls, "Hello, I'm at Orly and I have 27 cents. What do I do now?" We told them to come in, and we put them up in our apartment on the Left Bank. We had some quite distinguished visitors - Julian Bond, John Lewis for example. Some times my kids would compare notes about people who would be sharing their room. "My guy's been arrested 23 times. How many time's your guy been arrested?"

They held press conferences. We went around and met the media. They had quite a good time in Paris on their way home, and I think we got some good mileage.

C. The State Department "Blows" An Opportunity To Score Points During Martin Luther King Visit

We even had Martin Luther King coming through. A committee of resident Americans was formed to sponsor a speech he decided to give as a fund-raiser for his Southern Christian Leadership Foundation. I was perhaps as high on the official list as they got, of resident American sponsors wanting to put their names down as co-sponsor. He had won the Nobel Prize and was going to be going through Paris again later on, to collect it. He came to Paris with Harry Belafonte to give the speech. As a member of the organizing committee, I had gotten a promise early on that he would not touch Vietnam. His talk would be entirely about domestic Civil Rights problems. At this time, progress was being made, and he was a hero. As I understand it, Ambassador Bohlen sent a classified cable back to Washington about whether or not it would be appropriate for him to attend this

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public fund-raising speech at the Palais des Sports. The Department saw fit to reply in an unclassified message that attendance at the event was not part of his mission to the Elysée Palace. Well, this message went to every official activity in France, the least NATO platoon or whatever. "Don't go to the Martin Luther King speech!" So some of the tickets we sold were turned in. Other people turned them in for cheaper tickets in seats where they'd not be so visible.

I think my wife and I were the only Americans to sit in the most expensive seats. And I discovered that no one ever paid for their seats in that area — these were for the celebrities and movie starlets and darlings of the publicity firms around l'Etoile. So we were in elegant company at the boxing ring from which Martin Luther King was to give his speech.

Harry Belafonte had arrived in Paris a few days early, to make sure the acoustics were suitable. He's a professional! Paris had never heard such acoustics in the Palais. He also learned from somebody, not from me, about the exchange of telegrams about the Ambassador's attendance and he spilled this to the press a day before the talk and concert.

Well, it went off well, though I regret to say, some of the American students were outside getting signatures to petitions about Vietnam and it made me livid! But once inside, Harry gave a great performance. The talk was good. Afterwards there was a party by the organizers, and partying continued for the visitors, so they had problems getting their plane to Lille the next morning and had to charter a plane. So they didn't make much money.

Q: Did Ambassador Bohlen ever get questioned by the press about this by the French press?

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BELCHER: I have no idea. I don't think so. But four or five months later, when things had closed down for Ambassador Bohlen (France had withdrawn from NATO; Vietnam had become a very real issue; American-French relations were not good at all) I got a surprise.

The Ambassador didn't have many opportunities to meet with French groups but he gave some talks at the Dragon Center, and we could get a few meetings with student groups. His French was excellent. He got every nuance in even the most needling question. Once I was driving home with him after such a talk at the Cite Universitaire, and I had my surprise. In the car, he said he was sorry he hadn't gone to that Martin Luther King talk, as he looked back on it. He should have gone.

Q: You had how long in Paris?

Brief Reminiscence Of Leaving Cotonou On Weekend Of Kennedy Assassination; African Reaction

BELCHER: About three years. But I wonder if I could backtrack a bit about one small thing about Cotonou. When I left there, it turned out to be the weekend of the Kennedy assassination.

Q: Twenty-five years ago now!

BELCHER: We were going on a direct transfer to Paris by boat. One of those occasions where the family was put in a basket and hoisted up from dockside, over and onto the deck of the small French freighter-cum-passenger ship. We were the only Americans aboard. We went slowly up the West African coast to Marseille, stopping at just about every major city along the way. The assassination was on a Friday. We set off on Sunday. The ship's crew was very considerate and offered us the Purser's cabin if we wanted to hear the short wave broadcast of the funeral. Stopping off at the ports, I was able to check into what was going on. It could not have been more moving. The Africans personally were

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so hurt by it, so sympathetic. There were evidences of all kinds — people signing guest books, memorial services, national days of mourning.

Another thing about Cotonou: we happened to have a large English-teaching center, and plenty of space. So the Agency staged two training programs for USIS local employees from the neighboring Francophone posts, and some English speaking ones, too. There was one on Exhibits, but it turned out to be chiefly writing captions and such because we were starting from scratch. The Agency sent out experts to train them and I insisted they stay in the same hotel as the African trainees — living at the same level. This is something I perhaps stupidly believe in, that the visitors from Washington and the nationals live on an equal footing. But it is something they understood afterwards. We had a great time, and some very good training sessions. This Workshop had some trainers coming from Washington. And we had a photography workshop with a photographer from USIS Paris and one from USIS Delhi.

Q: This is a good time to ask, Pat, how much more we could do, or have done, to improve the training of our foreign nationals? But that was a one-time thing, wasn't it? Or was it?

BELCHER: Yes, just that one time.

Q: Looking back over your experience in Africa, did you find it necessary to have your own local training programs?

BELCHER: The kind of person we could hire would have at best a local high school education. In one or two cases we might be able to hire a university graduate but they would soon move on to be hired by their own government, or by Mobil or Exxon or Coca Cola. So we'd lose them. We had to do our own training of them usually.

Q: After Paris, what was your assignment?

Direct Transfer From Paris To Tanzania: Late 1966

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BELCHER: Then I went to Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, on a direct transfer. I was happy to go to Tanzania, to experience East Africa and compare it with West Africa. Our kids were also excited about East Africa and the opportunity to see some real game parks for the first time. In West Africa, there's not much of that sort of thing. Of all the countries in Africa to which they would have liked to go, they wanted Tanzania, I think because of Kilimanjaro. And yes, we did get to climb that.

It was one of the roughest assignments I've had just because it was very poor and the Chief of State, Julius Nyerere, attached a great deal of importance to principle. He was very idealistic. Even if it hurt the economy badly, he would cut off the aid if there were political strings attached.

A. Close Contact With Communist Country Diplomatic Representatives At Height of Vietnam War Sometimes Difficult

Most of the southern African liberation movements were represented in Tanzania. Other countries gave them money, I guess, to travel around. But Nyerere gave them offices and homes. And there were other difficult countries represented - Cuba, and North Vietnam, and the Viet Cong. My wife was secretary of the Diplomatic Wives Club and she had to have cordial relations with some ladies we weren't supposed to talk to. It was pretty funny that way. Once the Cubans' dog bit me — I don't think they had him do it on purpose! We also had what was then called Red China and sometimes they were allowed to speak to us, and we could speak to them. On the beach, we'd get to know some of these types, out of uniform. It was easier and more relaxed.

President Nyerere wanted the Europeans to stick to their Oyster Bay reserve, the difference in living standards between them and the Tanzanians was so appalling. This was hard on the Americans who didn't like to be isolated this way. Morale was pretty low. This was the first time I thought USIS could also be used to do something about the

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American community. There would be better brush-off on the Tanzanians if their own morale were a little higher.

We had the best USIS house in Africa, fabulous! The place would never have done as an Ambassador's residence because the guest rooms were too small, but it had great entertaining areas, inside and out. Luckily we had a very understanding Ambassador who didn't want me to force Vietnam down their throat, they were so opposed. He urged me to have pamphlets at the library desk for those who might ask. If I was asked to give a talk on Vietnam, I would do so. But our windows didn't feature that kind of thing.

Q: Could you identify him?

BELCHER: Yes, he was John Burns, who later was Director General of the Foreign Service, just before retirement. He was very sympathetic to Julius Nyerere, and not every administration was. Maybe the CIA has always looked down its nose at Nyerere.

B. USIS Frequently Identified As Being CIA:Concocts Novel Way To Refute The Rumor

Q: Our program was more or less a conventional one there? We had a library?

BELCHER: Yes, but soon after I arrived we were able to move into a nice, new USIS Center, a beautiful little theater in the back of it, nice air-conditioned offices upstairs over the theater. The library at the front was two stories high, not air-conditioned. Very attractive, with a balcony going around it where there were individual reading tables. I wanted them to know that we were open - that we didn't have any secrets. We were always being accused of being CIA. Occasionally posters on the telephone poles on the main drag would have lists of the Americans who were supposed to be CIA. Completely wrong, but damaging anyway. So I didn't want the library air-conditioned, with doors closed. It doesn't get very hot there and the Tanzanians don't care much for air-conditioning anyway. It had two nice big bay windows and the open doors between them.

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Once I hired a girl trained in the U.K. as a secretary because I knew she was the mistress of Julius Nyerere's brother. I told the poor Information Officer, "Would you please use this young lady as your secretary?" I just knew she would then report back to Joseph Nyerere what we were doing. And President Nyerere and members of the cabinet would know that we were not the CIA, that we were helping the country. And we did. We had fun. We had some Creative Writing Classes, some weekly jazz record concerts.

Q: Did you ever have the satisfaction of learning that she had passed on the word that you hoped she would pass on?

BELCHER: Yes, because after I left, Nyerere was quoted in a British publication, some obscure business monthly, stating that he wished he'd had Belcher working for him.

Run-in With Bruce Herschensohn, Assistant Director,USIA for Mopix Unpleasant And Damaging To Belcher's Career

About that time, I had quite a run-in with Bruce Herschensohn, over using his films. The Agency would send us small films on Vietnam, for us to run through the Embassy, to see if we could use them in the country. We couldn't, so I would offer them to some other country, because that was the system set up in the Circular Airgram sent out about the film. I think this galled Bruce, so he came out to see for himself. Ostensibly, he was coming to see how his films played for Tanzanians. So I had three shows set up at various locations en route in from the airport of the Saturday evening he arrived, so he could drop in briefly on each. But he wasn't interested.

What he was interested in was to ask me if in fact, I hadn't turned down his films because I was in disagreement with the U. S. policy in Vietnam? I declined to answer, because I am not accustomed to having my political convictions questioned by a fellow civil servant. Well, he went on the next morning, Monday morning, early, to Nairobi. I offered to have

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him test his latest film with the Embassy - one that we'd just gotten, and he could take a later plane. He declined and went to Nairobi.

When he got back to Washington, he wrote this up for the Area Director and demanded a written response from me.

Q: Who was the Area Director at that time?

BELCHER: I've forgotten. I had four years in Tanzania and during that time had four successive Area Directors, and my reputation went steadily downhill with each successive one.

I did reply, and cleared this with the Ambassador, that I had not done anything contrary to Country Team wishes on the use of the Vietnam films, and that I did not answer his probing question, repeated three times, because I found his behavior so distasteful as a guest in my home, and his accusation of disloyalty so repugnant. I was getting good Efficiency Reports from the Ambassador all these four years, but at the end, I discovered that that was the last whack I was to have at being a PAO.

Final Assignment: Washington - Resource Analysis Staff Not A Happy Assignment

Q: And then you were assigned where?

BELCHER: Back to Washington.

Q: What was the job here?

BELCHER: I had two possible jobs. One was working with Bill Edmondson who was taking over as head of Cultural Affairs for Africa. He was a guy I had known when he was Political Officer in Ghana. He later became American Ambassador to South Africa. Or Lew Schmidt who had been asked to form a new little office called the Resources Analysis Staff and

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wondered if I would like to join it. My Career Counselor advised me to take up the Schmidt offer as it would be working in the Agency, not with CU over at State.

Q: Did it work out well?

BELCHER: Not very.

Q: What year was this, incidentally?

BELCHER: '70 to '72. During the depth of Watergate and Vietnam.

Q: Was it that Lew's concept of the job didn't work out? Was that the problem?

BELCHER: No. I think the office was deliberately created by Henry Loomis outside the chain of command. You should consider how and why the office was formed. Lew Schmidt had been pulled out of Thailand short of end of tour. Ed Nichol had been pulled out of Vietnam. And I had been pulled out of Tanzania. We were given some theoretical things to work on but there were many periods with nothing to do.

This was an awkward period anyway. Many of the older officers in the Agency were having problems with their teenagers who had disappeared or were lost to drugs. And they were also being urged to accept early retirement to make room for younger officers deserving of promotion. Morale was not very good.

As far as Vietnam goes, I had always been critical of our role there but if I had been assigned there, I would have done what I was told to do. The reason I never was assigned was, I think, thanks to an Area Director who knew of my disenchantment. There was a time, I believed, when every French-speaker was supposed to be in Vietnam or in the pipeline, but Mark Lewis saved me. I still think LBJ and I saw eye to eye on Vietnam - that we'd reached the point of no return and should pull out, if only it could be managed.

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Belief That Agency Under Shakespeare Mishandled And Twisted Vietnam And Watergate News

But at that time, there was a propaganda war to be done, so let us twist the truth a bit and the Agency did so. The Voice of America newscasts did not always agree with BBC and Deutschwelle, etc., with the news they broadcast. The Voice turned the audiences right off with their kill statistics from Vietnam. I also noted, in Wireless File reports of the Agency testifying on the hill, that they twisted the truth in reporting foreign reactions to Vietnam coming in from our overseas posts.

At a PAO conference once in Nairobi, I asked Frank Shakespeare, "Isn't there some better way of handling the news out of Vietnam than statistics on the number of Viet Cong killed and North Vietnamese, etc.?" He said, "If I had some better way, I should write in my positive recommendations, but should not just criticize."

I think the program in Tanzania went the way it should have gone but I didn't win any points back home. In Washington for those two years, with nothing to do, I was able to review how poorly USIA was doing its job. About Watergate, for example. Here was a wonderful opportunity to tell the newly independent countries of Africa how a Chief of State can be removed constitutionally, without any loss of blood. My son has done quite a bit of escorting of African grantees around the U.B.S. and he finds they always think of Nixon as a great president. They know nothing about his being an unindicted co-conspirator, nothing about the pardon.

I wound up my career with some disillusionment, you see, but now I'm back in the escort business and love it! I'm leaving in two weeks for Southeast Asia with a ballet troupe. That I believe in.

Q: It's been a very interesting recital. You've told it well, warts and all. So, I can turn off the machine. But there's still some more tape left if there's more you want to...

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BELCHER: I think I've answered all the points in this very good article in the Alumni newspaper on the purposes of this Oral History. And I thank you. It's been a pleasant opportunity. I hope it may be of some use some time.

End of interview